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Secrecy dispute stalls U.S. arms aid policy

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The Reagan administration considers Rep. Lee Hamilton, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, to be its major hurdle to supplying arms to resistance forces in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan.

A senior administration official said yesterday the White House is prepared to provide effective support to the Nicaraguan resistance fighters and Jonas Savimbi in Angola.

"The problem is that Lee is uncomfortable with carrying this support out through the normal covert channels," a Reagan official said.

A bill sponsored by Mr. Hamilton, Indiana Democrat, would require that each case of support for freedom fighters be submitted to Congress in the form of a joint resolution, subject to open debate and vote in the both chambers. The bill has been approved by the House Intelligence Committee and is pending in the Foreign Affairs Committee.

"We don't agree with that but it's the next hurdle on all of our freedom fighter projects," the administration official said. "I don't think it will succeed in the Senate but that is his approach."

In the Senate, David Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has also ex-

pressed reservations about covert programs.

Mr. Hamilton's bill would end all covert aid to Angola, and allow aid to Mr. Savimbi "only if the provision of that support is the openly acknowledged policy of the United States."

Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole and Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, are two leading Republicans thought to oppose the Hamilton language.

Earlier this year, Mr. Dole offered a resolution of support for aid to Mr. Savimbi. But proponents of the measure could not get it out of the Foreign Relations Committee — where they did not have the votes — to the Senate floor, where its passage was more optimistically viewed.

Rather than have on record a negative vote for aid, Mr. Dole and several senators sent a letter of support for Mr. Savimbi to the administration. That letter was taken as an unofficial endorsement of the Angolan covert aid program and a counterbalance to the views of Mr. Hamilton.

The problem for the Reagan administration is not so much one of simply exporting arms and supplies to resistance fighters, but of the best means to help them and how to get third countries to assist the United States in putting the aid in the hands of rebels. Usually, countries that help don't want to be exposed as aiding the Americans.

Thus, the administration is insisting that on-going support of insurgencies should be settled in the secrecy of the committee room.

The need for secrecy makes it difficult for the White House to fully argue in public the question of what kind of arms the resistance forces need to fight effectively.

For example, the White House has refused to say publicly if the Nicaraguan resistance forces will be supplied with U.S.-made Stingers or Redeye missiles. But many military analysts say the contras can't survive without supplies of one or the other of the missiles.

One of the major weapons used by the Sandinista army against the resistance forces is the Soviet Hind M-24 helicopter gunship which is next to impossible to shoot down or turn away with small arms fire, but would be a ready target for either the new Stingers or the older Redeyes.